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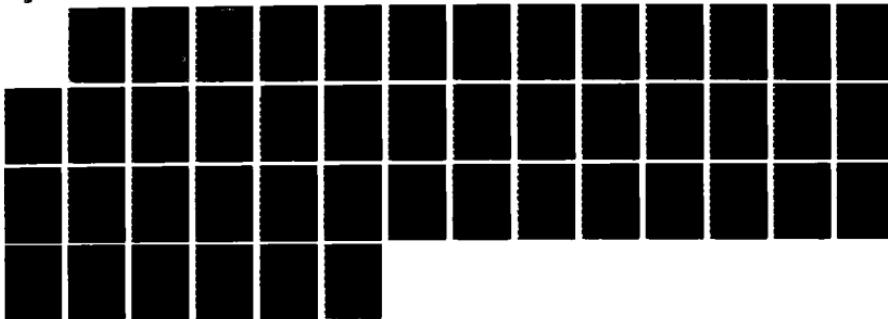
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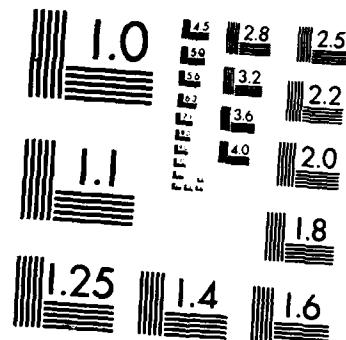
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THE OPERATIONAL CULMINATING POINT  
CAN YOU SEE IT COMING?

by

Major James D. Coomler  
Field Artillery

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School of Advanced Military Studies  
U.S. Army Command and General Staff College  
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Recurring events in all three operations fall into two broad categories: those events known to or caused by the attacker to himself and those brought about by the enemy. The overwhelming majority of events or traits which help bring about the culminating point are of the former; the attacker hastens his own culminating point more so than does the enemy. The study finds that a commander's overconfidence and stubborn commitment to a flawed course of action contributes most directly to his eventual inability to defend.

The study concludes that a conscious awareness of the concept of the culminating point can pay great dividends to an operational level commander, but those commanders choosing to ignore the conspicuous events forecasting their culminating point will most likely suffer defeat as a result.

THE OPERATIONAL CULMINATING POINT  
CAN YOU SEE IT COMING?

by

Major James D. Coomler  
Field Artillery

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## ABSTRACT

THE OPERATIONAL CULMINATING POINT--CAN YOU SEE IT COMING? by  
Major James D. Coomler, USA, 38 pages.

This study analyzes three World War II operational mechanized forces in the offense to determine if there are common recurring characteristics or traits exhibited by those forces that precede and foretell a unit is approaching its culminating point. They are: operations are the German defeat at El Alamein, 1942; the Soviet defeat at Kharkov, 1943; and the German defeat at the Battle of the Bulge, 1944. FM 100-5 cites the Clausewitzian concept of the culminating point as central to understanding AirLand Battle and operational art. Therefore, a commander who is more familiar with possible indicators and better understands historical examples of the culminating point has an advantage in making the necessary decisions in time to prevent his force from passing its culminating point or to allow him to take advantage of an enemy's. The study provides the reader: a better understanding of the culminating point concept, and its relationship to the implementation of doctrine, some guides to alert of possible approaching culminating points, and a commonality of understanding of the culminating point through historical examples.

Recurring events in all three operations fall into two broad categories: those events known to or caused by the attacker to himself and those brought about by the enemy. The overwhelming majority of events or traits which help bring about the culminating point are of the former; the attacker hastens his own culminating point more so than does the enemy. The study finds that a commander's overconfidence and stubborn commitment to a flawed course of action contributes most directly to his eventual inability to defend.

The study concludes that a conscious awareness of the concept of the culminating point can pay great dividends to an operational level commander, but those commanders choosing to ignore the conspicuous events forecasting their culminating point will most likely suffer defeat as a result.

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## THE OPERATIONAL CULMINATING POINT--CAN YOU SEE IT COMING?

With the publication of the 1982 edition of Field Manual 100-5, Operations, the U.S. Army presented a fighting doctrine rooted in classical military theory. FM 100-5 seeks to adapt the modern battlefield to long-standing military principles and actual military experience with the intent of tying modern land combat methods and techniques to a strong foundation. The idea of evolving tactics and operations from sound principles is certainly necessary and even crucial, but in doing so, some old concepts came to the forefront that the U.S. Army and most officers had not studied in quite some time, if at all. Clausewitz' idea of the culminating point is a good example. Yet, doctrine, to be useful, must be accepted and understood in its own right by those who have to apply it. FM 100-5 cites the concept of the culminating point as central to understanding AirLand Battle and operational art and, consequently, explains it to its readers. The Clausewitzian concept of culminating point is important but how easily can it be recognized?

The purpose of this study will be to determine if there are common recurring characteristics or indicators exhibited by an operational mechanized force in the offense which precede and foretell that the unit is approaching its culminating point. The hypothesis proposed is that there are common traits which indicate a unit is approaching its culminating point. Recognizing these indicators will assist a commander in making the necessary decisions in time to prevent his force from passing its culminating point or to allow him to take advantage of an enemy's.

In operational theory, the culminating point is that time in every offensive operation, unless it is strategically decisive, where the strength of the attacker no longer significantly exceeds that of the defender, and beyond which continued offensive operations therefore risk overextension, counterattack, and defeat.<sup>1</sup> FM 100-5 also adds, "The art of attack at all levels is to achieve decisive objectives before the culminating point is reached. Conversely, the art of defense is to hasten the culmination of the attack, recognize its advent, and be prepared to go over to the offense when it arrives."<sup>2</sup> As noted above, recognizing its advent is critical to the decision making and execution process. A commander must know more than what a culminating point is, he must be able to sense or recognize it in his own forces or those of the enemy, then take action. Clausewitz wrote of the difficulty in recognizing the culminating point when he stated, "If we remember how many factors contribute to an equation of forces, we will understand how difficult it is in some cases to determine which side has the upper hand. Often it is entirely a matter of the imagination. What matters therefore is to detect the culminating point with discriminative judgment."<sup>3</sup>

Given that it is important to recognize the culminating point for one's own operational success, but that it is difficult to do so, would not some common indicators be beneficial to the commander to help his discriminative judgment? FM 100-5 gives the following examples of events that move an operational offensive to its culminating point:<sup>4</sup>

"The forward movement of supplies may be insufficiently organized or may lack needed transport, or available stocks may be exhausted. The need to protect lines of communications from

partisans or regular forces operating on the flanks or in the rear may have sapped the strength of forward forces to the point that the attacker no longer has the needed quantitative advantage. The attacking force may have suffered sufficient combat losses to tip the balance of forces. The attacker may have entered terrain which is more easily defended. The soldiers of the attacking army may become physically exhausted and morally less committed as the attack progresses. The defending force may have become more determined as large portions of territory are lost. The defender may have been joined by new allies who now also feel threatened. All of these causes, and combinations of them, have resulted in offensive culminating points."

Until the present edition of Operations, the idea of the culminating point seldom was spoken of or written about, yet it occurs in every battle and campaign less those where the attacker achieves success without stopping. Therefore, examples of culminating points in campaigns should be numerous. This study will review and analyze three operational examples from World War II of units reaching their culminating points, and will look for common characteristics or indicators of activities or events leading to it. Common traits then will be evaluated for applicability today for the U.S. Army and, hopefully, will lead to a better understanding of theory and its relationship to doctrine, provide some guides to alert of possible approaching culminating points, assist in better planning to prevent friendly culminating points, and, finally, provide a commonality of understanding of the culminating point.

Three armies, two German and one Soviet, from World War II are documented. Each initiated offensive action with mechanized forces, then passed its culminating point, and was eventually defeated in following battles by the opposing enemy. The

operations are the German defeat at El Alamein, 1942; the Soviet defeat at Kharkov, 1943; and the German defeat at the Battle of the Bulge, 1944.

#### THE GERMAN DEFEAT AT EL ALAMEIN, 1942

During June, 1942 Field Marshal Rommel's Deutsches Afrika Korps continued to press its offensive towards Alexandria and Cairo after resupplying itself with captured supplies from the fallen Tobruk port and was only temporarily slowed down by the British abortive defensive efforts at Mersa Matruh. Rommel's goal was the complete expulsion of Allied powers from the African continent, thus threatening Axis intervention into the Middle East to support German operations in southern Russia and to deny critical oil supplies to the Allies. If successful, Rommel would destroy General Auchinleck's British Eighth Army, the last significant Allied force positioned to control lines of communications to Turkey, India, southern Russia, the Far East and the Middle East, as well as the Suez Canal. Although Rommel greatly exceeded Hitler's initial orders to defend Tunisia and western Libya, his operational successes in the battles of North Africa caused Hitler in the spring of 1942 to support the drive to Cairo thereby providing a possible strategic envelopment of the Allies.<sup>3</sup> But, to accomplish this drive, Rommel would be given few additional troops and equipment. Germany's main effort was and would remain the fight in Russia.

The Battle of El Alamein consisted of two separate battles fought at the same location. The First Battle of El Alamein was fought 2-18 July and pitted Rommel's weakened but attacking Afrika

Korps against the equally weakened, defending forces of Auchinleck.

The Second Battle of El Alamein was fought 23 October-4 November and consisted of an attack and subsequent pursuit by General Montgomery against the retreating Axis army. Although the latter is widely recognized by historians as the successful battle which caused the Axis to lose the war in eastern Africa, it was, in fact, the First Battle which represented the German operational culminating point, thus establishing the conditions for Montgomery's later counteroffensive. Until Rommel attacked at First El Alamein where he lost considerable forces and supplies, his army was capable of establishing a defense on good terrain to its rear against any British counteroffensive from the east, but even then Rommel was teetering close to his army's culminating point. In retrospect, German General Kesselring, Commander in Chief of the Mediterranean, said that "given our full knowledge of the gamble, the attack [German advance at the first battle of El Alamein] ought never to have been begun".<sup>6</sup> Mussolini also agreed:

"When (Rommel) had twice attacked unsuccessfully before Montgomery's offensive he should have withdrawn at once to Mersa Matruh... I told (Hitler) we had lost the initiative from June 1942 onwards, and that a nation which has lost the initiative has lost the war."<sup>7</sup>

Recognizing the passing of the culminating point after the fact, as Kesselring and Mussolini did, is of no use to the field commander. In the Battle of First El Alamein, neither Rommel nor Auchinleck foresaw or acknowledged the culminating point although indicators were present.

Of all things that contributed to the arrival of Rommel's culminating point at First El Alamein, the one most contributing factor was logistical shortages. From the beginning, the German

High Command had always considered Rommel's activities in Africa as a sideshow unworthy of large amounts of supplies that were critically needed elsewhere. And even those supplies he was allocated, although insignificant, placed an inordinate demand on the supply system. Everything needed by his army had to be shipped across the dangerous Mediterranean at great risk, off-loaded at ports inadequate for even a small percentage of his needs, and then transported hundreds of miles across the desert in truck convoys always in short supply.<sup>8</sup> For many months prior to the El Alamein attack Rommel was forced to live from hand to mouth and so was not unaware of the problems. David Irving, in his book on Rommel, writes, "He [Rommel] was well aware of his awkward situation. His ammunition and gasoline were low, his units understrength....His supply lines were long (1600 miles), while those of the enemy were short (100 miles) and well protected."<sup>9</sup> Martin van Creveld, in Supplying War, gives this opinion of Rommel's situation in 1942:

"With or without Malta in Axis hands, it is questionable whether an advance on Alexandria would have been practicable. Even if Hitler had the additional forces at his disposal, bringing them to Africa would have increased Panzerarmee's requirements to a point far beyond the combined capacity of Benghazi and Tripoli. This in turn would have made the accumulation of stores for an attack a hopeless task, while the number of vehicles required to transport stores inside Africa was far beyond the strictly limited resources of the Wehrmacht."<sup>10</sup>

Even the limited supplies, especially fuel, captured at Tobruk were insufficient to take Rommel to the Nile, but Rommel was determined to go on.<sup>11</sup> Yet his army was so starved for essential supplies and equipment that four out of five of his soldiers had traveled to El Alamein in captured British trucks.<sup>12</sup>

Even with this knowledge of his supply constraints, Rommel

chose to press the battle, for he was in a desperate situation. Van Creveld writes that Rommel's disregard for his logistical base placed him in the situation of being unable to stay where he was, so he either had to fall back or "flee forward" in the hope of living off the enemy.<sup>13</sup> His decision (or gamble) to move forward resulted in many of his units running out or limiting their expenditure of ammunition and fuel at an inopportune time during the battle. The difficult supply situation, as well as exhaustion and stiffening resistance, brought Panzerarmee to a halt on 4 July.<sup>14</sup> Rommel later wrote:

"The first essential condition for an army to be able to stand the strain of battle is an adequate stock of weapons, petrol and ammunition. In fact, the battle is fought and decided by the quartermasters before the shooting begins. The bravest men can do nothing without plenty of ammunition; and neither guns nor ammunition are of much use in mobile warfare unless there are vehicles with sufficient petrol to haul them around. Maintenance must also approximate in quantity and quality to that available to the enemy."<sup>15</sup>

Had Rommel appreciated his own thoughts about logistics sooner in his North African campaign, his attempts to advance beyond his means might not have been undertaken, thus preventing Rommel from exceeding his army's culminating point.

Another factor contributing to Rommel's passing of his culminating point was his army's shortage of combat troops. Because of the need for German troops in other parts of Europe and because of the inability to supply those Axis soldiers already in North Africa, let alone more, Rommel was given all the men the German High Command thought he needed to conduct his directed defense of Africa. Even after Rommel's offensive successes, Hitler could not or would not provide more. With no units due in and with the combat attrition of the past several battles, a more cautious

or conservative general might have tried to concentrate his remaining units for a critical, limited objective or, perhaps, even recognized that force ratios required a defensive operation in order not to exceed his culminating point. Instead, Rommel, neither cautious nor conservative, chose to continue with his aggressive pursuit and attack of the Eighth Army. Rommel's mistake was not in being aggressive since audacity, initiative, and agility are key ingredients to battlefield success and are necessary if one is to achieve decisive ends with limited means. Rommel had been successful in the past and had no intentions now of changing his style. He thought he had the British on the run and could not afford to give them time to prepare their defenses, nor would his supply posture allow him to stop. However, he failed correctly to judge his army's capacity to match his audacity.

Rommel again intended to attack along the seam between the two British corps, penetrate, and fan out north and south behind them. He envisioned British forces would either be destroyed or would run in panic as they had in the past. Though, if they ran, there would be no defensive line for them to fall back to this time. The Afrika Korps' next stop would be Alexandria. Rommel calculated his three German divisions and three Italian corps to have a combined total of 85 medium and light tanks, 500 infantrymen in each of the two panzer divisions, 1,000 infantrymen in the grenadier division, and a total of 5,500 infantry in the three Italian corps.<sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup> Correlli Barnett describes Rommel's plan as follows:

"Rommel proposed to hustle the British into a fresh retreat by a bold and dazzling maneuver....The battle plan was typical of Rommel: hasty, reckless, unrealistic and based on faulty information. But he counted as always on the British's failure to make nonsense of rational calculation and to run away behind the enemy, the British Command,

fearful for its communications, would again lose its nerve and bolt."<sup>18</sup>

With his attention focused on the breakthrough, Rommel failed to recognize that his Afrika Korps had neared its limit; or, recognizing that fact, took the risk anyway. On the eve of battle, his men were exhausted, sometimes falling asleep in daylight in front of the enemy. His army was critically short supplies, yet a third of its limited stocks were still hundreds of miles to the rear awaiting transportation to the front. And he had too few tanks remaining in his panzer divisions to finish the dazzling maneuver which he expected his soldiers to try at a brisk pace. Irving writes, "The pendulum of conflict in the desert had now halted. The impetus of Rommel's Panzer Army was almost gone."<sup>19</sup> Barnett agrees by saying, "If there were a moment during the desert campaigns when...destiny seemed to hold its breath, it was on the night of 30th June/1st July, 1942. This night...marked the turn of the Second World War..."<sup>20</sup> But Rommel, the great tactician, failed to recognize it.

The First Battle of El Alamein was joined but it was not until several days later that Rommel fully realized the condition of his army. By then, the damage had been done. The tactical battle ebbed and flowed back and forth as both sides enjoyed their share of successes and failures in engagements, but Rommel failed to achieve any decisive objectives and eventually had to turn to the tactical defense. In the process, his strength was reduced. The British could replenish new units and supplies faster than the very limited reconstitution capability of the Axis and, with the British attack during the Second Battle of El Alamein, they routed the Afrika Korps. Rommel's successful tactical defense during the

first battle could not withstand the subsequent operational counteroffensive from the British in the next battle of El Alamein. Consequently, Rommel's operational culminating point was exceeded.

In addition to the indicators present before the battle, other indicators were available during the battle to warn Rommel of possible impending impediments to his army's ability to defend. The soldiers were driven to exhaustion and were prostrate with fatigue, tortured by the sun and thirst. Italian divisions began to disintegrate and entire battalions were deserting in battle. Several times German units had to be taken out of line to plug gaps left by defeated or departed Italian units. When no combat units were available, staff personnel, signalmen, and cooks were used. Intelligence collection assets were lost to combat, thus making it even more difficult to determine an accurate picture of the situation. Added to this was the difficulty of receiving accurate reports as units, engagements, and the battlefield became more confused.<sup>21</sup>

Rommel himself sensed the change in the battle and the passing of the tactical initiative to Auchinleck. He knew he had only twenty-six tanks operational, stretched supply lines, exhausted men, and a strengthening British defense; consequently, he gave himself one more day to gain victory, otherwise he would have to go to the defense. At the end of the next day, 3 July, he acknowledged defeat and gave orders for his Army to dig in. For the next few days Panzerarmee withstood British counterattacks but only by the slimmest of margins as it was all Rommel could do to prevent catastrophe. British breakthroughs caused Rommel to exclaim "the situation was beginning to take on crisis

proportions."<sup>22</sup> At this point, Rommel still had not recognized the passage of his operational culminating point because, after several days of rest for his army, he again attacked and was again checked. The men and equipment he unwisely expended would be critically needed at the Second Battle of El Alamein.

But, on the other side of the battlefield, neither Auchinleck nor his corps commanders recognized the important passage of Rommel's operational culminating point. Instead, they concentrated on the tactical fight. On 4 July, Auchinleck told his commanders the "whole idea was to get Rommel over to the defensive," not realizing that he had already done so, and then "attack and destroy the enemy in his present positions."<sup>23</sup> Auchinleck ordered his XIII Corps to attack but only one brigade made any effort to do so and then was repelled. Other formations seem hardly to have given the order serious consideration. During the following four days Auchinleck's call for initiative went unheeded as Eighth Army could do little more than shuffle. A killing blow now would have ended the battle, but "there was at this time a sullen reluctance to move." Barnett, in The Desert Generals, adds, "One brigadier's opinion of the plan was that "it doesn't look real." The same brigadier described as "fanciful" an attack by ninety-nine tanks and an infantry brigade on the fifteen German tanks of the 15th Panzer Division."<sup>24</sup> This lack of will and agility and failure to seize the opportunity precisely at the time when it would have been most rewarding gave Rommel the time necessary to establish his tactical defense. Pitt, in The Crucible of War, concludes, "On the face of it the possibilities of dealing the Afrika Korps a heavy and possibly lethal blow were thus not as low as might have been

expected,...while Rommel was left to languish at the end of his extended supply lines."<sup>25</sup> Thereafter, the battle seesawed back and forth inconsequentially as both sides grappled to exhaustion and then reverted to the defensive to rebuild. The Afrika Korps had exceeded their operational culminating point and, with Britain's edge in logistics, Eighth Army under the command of Montgomery overwhelmed Rommel at the Second Battle of El Alamein. The fact that the British did not or could not take advantage of the German operational culminating point until several months later points out that the concept of the cumulating point is relative between the two opposing forces. The defending force must possess capability and will to take advantage of the attacking force's weakening condition. Had Auchinleck successfully recognized Rommel's situation, perhaps he might also have halted the British tactical attacks which were not necessary and which only reduced British combat power. Had Auchinleck focused more on the operational level of war instead of the tactical battle, he might have generated sufficient relative combat power within a week to initiate the Second Battle of El Alamein thereby taking advantage of Rommel's culminating point and, consequently, defeating him several months sooner.

#### THE SOVIET DEFEAT AT KHARKOV, 1943

On 22 June 1941 Hitler launched OPERATION BARBAROSSA, the German invasion of the Soviet Union. German Army Group South faced the greatest resistance in the Ukraine and what was designed as a quick German victory turned into a long, hard campaign with the stubborn Russians that ended forward movement at the Volga River

and at Stalingrad with the encirclement and surrender of the German Sixth Army during the winter of 1942/43. The Russians followed their success with a general counteroffensive aimed at advancing rapidly to the Dneiper River with the intention of surrounding and destroying 75 Axis divisions, thus opening the way for a strategic envelopment of the entire German Army. After two years of defeat, the Soviet command was eager to repay the Nazis.

The Soviet plan called for two deep thrusts of mobile groups (army size) to attack on divergent axes without any operational pause that would allow the enemy time to redeploy forces, resupply, or prepare fortified defenses. The Soviet High Command fully expected to meet a retreating, weakened German army and to do so with a Soviet advantage of eight to one in men and weapons.<sup>26</sup> To accomplish this plan, the Soviet fronts themselves would have to conduct operations without pause with weakened forces, extended supply lines, and few, if any, reserves.<sup>27</sup> Stalin gave no consideration whatsoever to reverting to the defense or even an operational pause, if only temporarily, to prepare for this great offensive. Stalin said, "The Armies of the General Army Group South have been smashed and can only try to withdraw behind the Dneiper."<sup>28</sup> His subordinate commanders agreed. On 29 January, the Soviet mobile groups Sixth Army and Group Popov and other supporting attacks throughout the area initiated the battle, but it was the Soviets who found themselves pushed back across the Donets River by the end of March.

Three factors contributed to the Soviets exceeding their culminating point before they achieved decisive success: logistics, tactical operations, and a stubborn commitment to

maintaining the offensive.

As already mentioned, the Soviets were attacking with weakened forces from the incessant fighting of December and January. Both infantry and, more important, armor units were drastically short of men and machines. Sixth Army had only 40 tanks; Group Popov, only 212. Yet, these two armies were expected to conduct 300 kilometer deep operations with an uncertain supply line. Supply bases were still far to the rear of the front line and there were not enough trucks and horses available to transport necessary supplies over the bad roads. Group Popov started the attack with shortages of fuel and ammunition and then inadvertently degraded their own combat force even more when required to leave forces behind to guard supply trains and lines of communications. By 18 February Popov sent the message "All wheels are standing still" and reported his disastrous supply situation, but the Front was still not ready to abandon the offensive even as Popov's brigades were collapsing. On 23 February Popov radioed that all he had left was a handful of tanks with no fuel, no ammunition, and no food. The Front's response was to keep moving and destroy the enemy. It was not until the following day that Vatutin, the Front Commander, fully accepted conditions as they were and ordered the offensive to halt. By then, Popov's Mobile Group was fragmented and fighting for its existence. A Panzer Division totally destroyed it on 28 February.<sup>22</sup> Logistical problems alone could have caused the Soviets to exceed their culminating point, but there were others.

The Soviets committed several tactical errors that were factors in their culminating point. Stalin and his central military command, STAVKA, were so enamored with the thought of the

Germans retreating that they felt secure in their plan for a general offensive along the entire 750 mile front in southern Russia. As a consequence, armies and fronts did not keep operational reserves since all combat power would be needed for the broad linear push. When situations arose calling for fresh units, such as the reinforcement of Group Popov, no reserves were available to influence the battle. Fronts had to pull divisions out of line, thus making new sectors susceptible to German attack.

Commanders also failed to mass what combat strength they had left thus limiting their offensive potential. Armies permitted depleted divisions to continue to fight ineffectively instead of regrouping the remaining tanks, artillery and soldiers into fewer stronger forces. Higher headquarters always pressured subordinates to maintain the momentum and to accomplish assigned missions, but by doing so, allowed units to get bogged down attempting tasks for which they were no longer capable. Several times Popov's tank corps came to the rescue of infantry units which caused Popov to fall farther behind his mission of a deep operational drive. As Group Popov drove deeper, more and more units were needed to hold the flanks against the already counterattacking Germans, which further degraded the strength of the main effort and permitted Manstein's units to attack and destroy, piecemeal, several weak, small forces.<sup>20</sup>

The final error the Soviets made was to assume incorrectly that the Germans were retreating; this was their fatal error because, without it, Soviet commanders might have recognized their approaching culminating point. From the very beginning the Soviet commanders maintained an unrealistic and overoptimistic attitude

that Germans were on the run and that the decisive victory was at hand. Lieutenant Colonel Glantz, in his authoritative book on Soviet offensive operations, writes, "An air of unrealism and overconfidence had pervaded Soviet headquarters for weeks and colored all aspects of Soviet planning. That mood would spell doom for the Soviet offensive and many of the men participating in it."<sup>31</sup> Carell adds in Scorched Earth that the assumption that the Germans were in a general retreat "rapidly became an article of faith."<sup>32</sup> But the Soviets were wrong; they had grossly misread the battlefield!

Commanders from Stalin to corps were so biased by the above idea that they ignored, misread, or would not accept intelligence indicators or reports from subordinates presenting any other conclusion. Even as the German Army was destroying Group Popov piecemeal on 19 February, Soviet units were receiving this order from the Front, "I order the encirclement and destruction of the enemy at Krasnoarmeiskoye. Fully restore the situation. Do not, in any case, permit an enemy withdrawal."<sup>33</sup> Warnings of impending disaster from the field were ignored by Vatutin until 24 February when he finally realized the condition of his forces, at which time he ordered the Front to go to the defense. By then, it was too late.

In contrast, Manstein not only correctly assessed the situation his army was facing but determined the enemy's intentions and prepared his course of action to take advantage of its weaknesses. Manstein knew he did not have the forces necessary to hold a linear defense but his orders from Hitler were not to give up territory. Instead, Manstein convinced Hitler to allow Army

Group South freedom of movement which would establish the conditions for a major counteroffensive. Glantz summarizes:

"That plan, once formulated, capitalized on superior German mobility and command flexibility. In essence, permitting an unhindered Soviet advance in some sectors, by holding tightly to a few critical sectors, and by deliberately taking the calculated risk of reducing German forces to a minimum in other sectors, Manstein intended to generate sufficient operational reserves to mount a coordinated counteroffensive.... The plan relied on an attack by concentrated forces along converging axes of advance. It capitalized on the offensive strength of the SS Panzer Corps divisions and the synergistic effect of the weaker panzer divisions attacking on adjacent axes along converging lines."<sup>34</sup>

Manstein was going to accept the Soviet attack, let them expend their strength while saving his own, and then counterattack when the Soviets were incapable of defending effectively. Manstein's plan worked perfectly.

While the Soviet command never fully recognized the effects of inadequate supply, mistaken tactics, and a will to attack which was not prudent and how these contributed to their own inability to attack and then defend, Manstein certainly did. Manstein's plan was based on the principle that the Russians would extend themselves to the point where he could then unleash his decisive counteroffensive, which not only would destroy the Soviet attack but also would set the stage for the campaign to drive to Kursk. Manstein was not interested in just stabilizing the current battle. To assist the arrival of the Soviet culminating point, Manstein undertook operations directed at Soviet weaknesses. German air and ground missions destroyed supply bases and transportation systems within 300 kilometers of the front to insure a decreased rate of supply to the Soviets, and, during the battle, units mounted special operations to destroy supply lines within the battle

area.<sup>35</sup> Tactically, the German Army continually sought to attack weakness with strength and concentrated its forces to do so.

In the Battle of Kharkov, Manstein sought to gain the initiative and then to retain it. It was Manstein who better appreciated the concept of the culminating point and helped hasten its approach. But it was the Soviets who lost the battle through their own mistakes. The Soviets not only did not anticipate German capabilities and intentions, they also failed to look at their own capabilities and courses of actions.

#### THE GERMAN DEFEAT AT THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE, 1944

Unlike Manstein's correct appraisal of Soviet intentions in the Kharkov Campaign, the Allied appraisal of German intentions and capabilities in the Ardennes in December 1944 was completely wrong. The Allies expected no attack, exactly what Hitler had hoped. Hitler desperately gambled that an all-or-nothing counteroffensive to Antwerp would split the Allied forces, destroy the separated armies in the north, and thus upset their timetables seriously enough to permit the bulk of the German forces in the west to move to the east to defend against the advancing Russians. Hitler's generals predicted that it would not work, that there were not enough men and equipment to do the job, but Hitler gave the orders for execution anyway. For several months the German High Command concentrated forces from all over the western front with surprising secrecy to gather the twenty-five divisions involved in this bold offensive which almost succeeded. The offensive started 16 December but by the end of January this last German attack against the Allies found itself being pushed back beyond its initial

starting positions. In the process, Hitler lost 100,000 men, 800 tanks, and 1,000 planes that he could not replace, thereby opening the door for the final Allied push into Germany.<sup>36</sup>

Three significant factors caused the Germans to exceed their culminating point: Hitler's unyielding will, logistics, and the tactical defense of the enemy.

As has already been mentioned, Hitler's generals were not supportive of the plan from the beginning but had little recourse other than to follow the Fuehrer's orders. They had already exhausted their professional military views to no avail. Even after seventeen days of combat and still far from the initial objective of the Meuse River, Hitler would not yield to the same generals who had given him the victories of the past five years.

"The failure to sever the corridor into Bastogne convinced General von Manteuffel that he stood no chance of taking the town and that the time had come to abandon all thought of continuing the offensive in the Ardennes. Lest the troops in the tip of the salient be trapped, he appealed to Field Marshal Model on the night of January 2 for permission to fall back to a line anchored on Houffalize. Von Luttwitz, who still had troops in the tip of the bulge, lent his voice to the appeal. Although Model agreed professionally, he had no authority to sanction withdrawal or even to desist in trying to take Bastogne. For his troubles in asking, von Manteuffel received merely another order to attack."<sup>37</sup>

Had Hitler listened to his field commanders, either before or during the Ardennes offensive, they might have been able to stabilize the battle to permit an effective defense, thus freeing the strategic reserve for the greatest threat, the Russians. As it was, not until 8 January did Hitler finally admit that the offensive in the Ardennes had failed, but he still required all ground in the bulge to be defended. Only after unacceptable losses did he allow forces to withdraw from the salient on 12 January.

Ammunition and especially fuel shortages contributed significantly to the inability of the Germans to continue their attack and ultimately to their weak defense when the Allies started pressing. As early as 21 December, the lead division, 2d Panzer, had run out of gasoline and waited until the 23rd before receiving enough fuel to continue the attack. This delay and those experienced by many other units gave crucial time to the Allies to establish a firm defense as new units poured into the area. The fuel crisis had not gone unforeseen by the Germans but, with the great effectiveness of Allied strategic and tactical aerial bombings against fuel production and transportation means, there just was not enough gasoline to keep the divisions moving. The German solution to this was to capture American fuel dumps. Once this was recognized, American soldiers fought doggedly to deny the Germans the dumps, the one thing they needed most. Without fuel, the Ardennes offensive ground to a halt.

The one thing that Model's Army Group B did not anticipate and which directly contributed the most to the arrival of the German culminating point was that the "American soldier was showing almost everywhere on the defense a stubborn resistance to being pushed around that was almost as unexpectedly heartening to his commanders as it was unexpectedly dismaying to the Germans."<sup>38</sup> Weigley says it best:

"The victory in the Ardennes belonged preeminently to the American soldier....They [the Allies] were able eventually to regain control because their soldiers' stubbornness and bravery did most of the job for them, gradually wresting the momentum of battle away from the enemy and in time restoring it to the Allied command."<sup>39</sup>

Privates and colonels alike quickly recognized that the key to holding the Ardennes with its thick forests, deep ravines, and

narrow, winding roads was to block and control the few major road junctions and villages through which they travelled. Important engagements were fought not only at St. Vith, Houffalize, and Bastogne but also at other nameless road junctions by mixed groups of men and units. Their efforts, like those of the legendary 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne, slowed the Germans enough for the Allies to organize, first, a creditable defense and, by 25 December, a counteroffensive with Patton's Third Army.

The Germans' operational culminating point was reached in late December, but by the 18th Eisenhower had said that sufficient information concerning the enemy's strength, intentions, and situation, and of the Allies capabilities were known to allow planning of the counteroffensive. Generals Patton and Collins anticipated very early that the Germans could not sustain their offensive, and with ever increasing Allied strength, planned for the counteroffensive. If not by name, then by concept, they both understood the culminating point.

Field Marshal Montgomery, on the other hand, had no intention of attacking until "he was certain the enemy had exhausted himself."<sup>40</sup> Bradley's call to him forecasting the Germans' highwater mark to be 26 December had little effect and it was not until after 28 January that Montgomery allowed his units to attack. By then, many German units had already escaped from a potential double envelopment with Patton's forces in the south.<sup>41</sup> This represents the difference between how two operational commanders read the battlefield, recognized the passage of the culminating point, and took timely action to take advantage of it.

The Battle of the Bulge should never have been fought. German

generals acknowledged that the strategic culminating point was already at hand but Hitler persisted. Once engaged, again the German generals recognized the approach of the operational culminating point and recommended the transition to the defense and again Hitler would not yield until it was too late. Hitler had lost his desperate gamble.

#### EVALUATION AND ANALYSIS

In the three operations described above, the offensive players in each case exceeded their offensive operational culminating point as evidenced by their eventual defeat at the hands of their enemies. Rommel at El Alamein was able tactically to defend for a short time but this was more a function of the British not realizing Rommel's situation or their inability to do anything tactically about it. As soon as the British were ready to conduct their counteroffensive at the Second Battle of El Alamein, they quickly pressured the Afrika Korps into a retreat. The British had sequenced their tactical battles and major operations to achieve a theater strategic goal, which is precisely the definition of the operational level of war, and the Germans could not defend. The same is true for the other two battles, except the counteroffensives were much quicker in occurring.

Of course, three historical accounts are by no means a full and conclusive base from which to draw and formulate new, scientific military principles or rules about the culminating point. That was not the purpose of this study. However, these three mechanized operations have provided some common recurring characteristics, traits, or events which may be of benefit to a

commander in the Eighties to consider and think about. Listed below are traits and events by battle which influenced the culminating point.

	Rommel El Alamein	Vatutin Kharkov	Hitler Bulge
Expectation of decisive results	x	x	x
Overconfidence	x	x	x
Cdrs didn't listen to subordinates		x	x
Subordinates approved cdr's plan	x	x	
Cdrs stubborn commitment to go forward	x	x	x
No option, had to attack	x		x
Thought enemy weak or retreating	x	x	x
Cdr had no desire to go to defense	x	x	x
Cdr recognized culminating point too late	x	x	x
"Dazzling" maneuver plan	x	x	x
Few reserves	x	x	
Exhausted soldiers before attack	x	x	
Whole units destroyed in attack	x	x	
Breakdown of intelligence collection	x	x	
Losses incurred made defense impossible	x	x	x
Logistical shortages	x	x	x
Logistical shortages evident beforehand	x	x	x
Long or difficult lines of communications	x	x	x
Shortage of transportation assets	x	x	x
Not enough fuel & ammo to reach objective	x	x	x
Tactical defense of enemy	x	x	x

As shown above, many events happened in all three operations and fall into two broad categories: those events known to or caused by the attacker to himself and those brought about by the enemy. The overwhelming majority of events or traits which helped cause the culminating point are of the former; the attacker hastened his own culminating point more than did the enemy.

Rommel, Vatutin, and Hitler all exhibited an overconfidence and an expectation of decisive results from which they would not yield, even when confronted with many practical problems. They took risks with the hopes of achieving great operational or strategic victories just as history has shown many other battles where calculated risks have produced great results. Confidence in

one's plans is not a fault but it must be balanced with an honest acceptance of capabilities. There is a difference between a reasoned, calculated risk and a bold, uncalculated gamble. Commanders are expected to make necessary decisions based on the facts at hand and in concert with their military genius to arrive at a proper course of action. In these three battles, though, the commanders intentionally disregarded or overlooked supply problems, force ratios, troop conditions, enemy capabilities, and subordinates' views, all facts known beforehand, and expected their military genius and a cooperative enemy to bring victory. Had they not been so overconfident, Rommel, Vatutin, or Hitler might have appreciated sooner the other factors which influenced their culminating points.

Even if one accepts the assumption that the three commanders did fully consider logistics and combat ratios before the battles, military professionals must still question all three's stubborn commitment to continue the attack long past obvious problems which would influence the outcome against them. Reports of whole divisions running out of fuel or declining battle because of shortage of ammunition, exhausted soldiers, destroyed brigades, and pleas from field commanders, combined or singular, should compel the prudent commander to reconsider the feasibility of the operation. These three commanders still were giving orders to attack when their units were already too weak to defend.

A large part of the overconfidence shared by Rommel and Vatutin was caused by the belief that the enemy was already beaten and on the run. Whether this was an intelligence failure or a miscalculation on the part of the commanders, believing the enemy

was in disarray substantiated their decisions to continue the attack. This inaccurate and imaginary belief in a defeated enemy further compounded itself when reports came in outlining an aggressively defending enemy. Surely, these incidents were isolated and overstated! The generals could not accept a defeated army turning to defend, let alone generating the combat power to attack. Such reports were returned with admonitions to keep to the plan.

The attacking armies had designed their maneuver plans to be the first step in a strategically successful campaign and, consequently, were so engrossed with winning the war that they were unwilling to concede the need to defend while still fighting the first battle. Again, commanders focused their attention on the ultimate end and did not adequately prepare and study the means and ways to accomplish it. Why should they? These same armies in earlier days had given their commanders what they wanted under adverse conditions and were expected to do so once again. Rommel's, Vatutin's, and Hitler's "dazzling" plans would bring success before any significant shortcomings could interfere, so they thought. But conditions had changed although Rommel's, Vatutin's, and Hitler's overconfidence would not let them consider such things.

Another self-inflicted, contributing factor to the culminating point was the severe logistical situation shared by all three armies before and during their offensives. In each case, shortages were known beforehand but were not allowed to dictate or interfere with the operations. Had the supply situation not been so bad, there might be some basis for accepting the audacity of the three

plans, but in light of what is known now, many wonder why they were even initiated. Whether at El Alamein, Kharkov, or the Ardennes, commanders knowingly committed their forces to the operation without enough fuel or ammunition to reach objectives. Rommel had already allowed himself to get into a supply situation which required him either to attack or withdraw. Vatutin could not supply himself at his forward line of troops, yet his Group Popov and 6th Army were to drive 300 kilometers into the enemy. Hitler's Army Group B depended on the capture of U.S. fuel dumps to reach the Meuse River. Still, commanders' overconfidence and belief in a weak enemy evidently led them to disregard logistical problems which subsequently contributed to the culminating point in each case.

The historical cases present other common characteristics of an approaching culminating point which the attackers permitted to occur. They are listed in the chart and, although not discussed in detail here, are equally important to the understanding of the culminating point.

The second broad category of events leading to the culminating point were those induced or caused by Auchinleck, Manstein, and Eisenhower. Although none of the commanders spoke of the culminating point by name, they all knew they had to defend long enough to survive while attriting the attacker before they could launch a counteroffensive. Auchinleck's actions at El Alamein perhaps show that he least understood the concept and wasted some of his potential combat power through indecisive tactical counterattacks, when he should have been preparing for a decisive

counteroffensive. There were times at El Alamein when Rommel was vulnerable, as he himself had wasted forces on tactical attacks.

Manstein not only reacted to the enemy's culminating point, he planned his operation around it. His plan contributed the most towards helping the Russians pass the point of no return, at which time he was ready to go on the offensive. Manstein also understood the difference between thinking at the tactical and operational level of war. He was preparing the battlefield not just for the defeat of the Soviet Army at Kharkov but for the follow-on offensive at Kursk. In contrast, Auchinleck thought at the tactical level and, because he did so, missed the opportunity to launch an operational offensive that would have led more quickly to Rommel's demise in Africa.

Initially, Eisenhower and his generals were busy trying to stabilize the tactical battle and, when accomplished through a combination of aggressive fighting by soldiers and the positioning of units by generals, they turned their attention to a counteroffensive. They even estimated the day the Germans would be at their culminating point and planned an offensive by Patton. What Eisenhower could not do was to convince Montgomery of the same, thereby allowing the bulk of the German Army to escape.

To defeat the attacking forces, all three defending commanders sought the traditional military end, the destruction of the opposing force. Losses inflicted, whether by destruction of whole units, attrition, or by troop exhaustion, eventually caused the attackers to stop and defend, but by then, losses incurred had already made an operational defense impossible.

A more indirect way all three contributed to the enemies'

inability to defend was the ongoing attack of the opposing force's logistical and transportation assets. While the attackers failed to recognize their supply problems and the resulting effects on their attacks, the defenders aggravated the attackers' situation by directing forces against logistics to add to the supply constraints. In a long war it is natural to attack the enemy's logistical base and all sides in WW II reaped such benefits. But Manstein personally did the most of the three commanders to influence supply problems for his particular operation and battle area by directing attacks on enemy logistics to a line 300 miles behind the FLOT, thus denying the Soviets tactical or operational supply for the duration of the battle. Again, he was proactive in his desire to hasten the Soviet culminating point and included in his plans attacks on enemy logistics as one of the ways to help cause it to happen.

Two other important events caused by the defenders which contributed to the culminating point are obvious but important to mention. First, the normal fog and friction of war and the destruction of so many enemy units, to include critical intelligence and signal units, resulted in a breakdown of intelligence collection and reporting and a failure to send accurate reports to higher headquarters. With an unclear picture, attacking headquarters made more mistakes and waited longer to make decisions. Second, the tactical defense fought much harder or smarter than expected by the attackers which dramatically upset their plans.

Several traits, characteristics, or events were common to the three campaigns in explaining why the operational culminating point

occurred. The one which contributed the most was the overconfident and stubborn mindset of the attacking commanders which clouded a rational acceptance of facts. The one most clearly present and observable to the attacker was the logistical shortages. The one most unexpected by the attacker was the aggressive defense and damage caused by the defender. The one least understood is why the attacking commanders would not permit their units to go to the defensive until it was too late.

It is further interesting to note that of the six commanders involved, Manstein's actions indicate that he had a clearer appreciation for and application of the culminating point concept. Instead of reacting to the attackers' culminating point after the fact as the British and the Americans did, Manstein planned for and intentionally helped influence the arrival of the enemy's culminating point and then executed a sequenced plan to take advantage of it.

This study of the operations at El Alamein, Kharkov, and the Bulge has provided some common recurring characteristics or traits exhibited by WWII offensive operational forces which may be useful to the modern commander to consider as forecasters of an approaching culminating point, either for his own forces or for those of the enemy. Commanders and their staffs will have to analyze these events in context with the current situation and use their judgment to decide a degree of applicability. While it may be obvious that a logistical shortfall will eventually upset a plan, the question of when and to what extent is critical to whether it will hasten a culminating point or just cause an

inconvenience while the objectives are still met. It must be remembered that obvious logistical shortfalls were disregarded by the German and Soviet commanders in the examples, and because they were, the timing of the culminating point was affected. The same is true for the other common events or traits. They were relevant to those specific battles and may be useful as indicators in the future, but they cannot be used as a checklist to detect a culminating point. The indicators are not meant to be a new area of military science, but only an addition to one's knowledge and use in military art.

It is important to note that the culminating point is relative to the enemy and not an absolute, unilateral event. The enemy must respond to an attacking force's passage of its culminating point to give the culminating point meaning, otherwise the attacker may still achieve success. If the attacker does achieve success, then, by definition, he has not passed his culminating point. If an attacker's combat power is reduced to almost nothing in comparison to the defender's (whether because of poor logistics or a strong defense), yet continues the attack and is successful, then he has not passed his culminating point because the defender did not or could not take advantage and force upon the attacker the culminating point. History gives many examples of a vastly inferior attacking force winning the battle because the defender did not use his combat power effectively to force the attacker to stop. The concept of the culminating point, like war, rests upon two opposing sides seeking superiority and victory over each other. In Rommel's case, he was unable to succeed because he was past his operational culminating point and the British reacted to Rommel and

took advantage, albeit several months later.

The concept of the culminating point is certainly still relevant and applicable. Like many other Clausewitzian concepts, it serves as an underlying principle of U.S. Army doctrine, as evidenced by FM 100-5's allocation of an appendix to key concepts. Military professionals should not become obsessed with the culminating point but it must be part of their vocabulary and understanding of Army doctrine. The concept should be raised to a higher level of consciousness and discussed openly during the preparation and conduct of operations. The essence of combat is to achieve your objectives before you reach your own culminating point, or to cause the enemy to pass his culminating point so you can take advantage of it. FM 100-5 writes of the culminating point, "While not new to the US Army in application, (it has) not been dealt with in doctrinal literature for some time, and (its) terminology may therefore be unfamiliar to many American soldiers."<sup>42</sup>

The concept of the culminating point is a mind-set to be used conscientiously as Manstein employed it. Eisenhower's goal was not to be beaten at the Battle of the Bulge and his method was to keep the Nazis' plan from working, then to initiate a counteraction. Manstein's intent was not overly to concern himself with the German plan, but to cause his plan to work. From the beginning, Manstein sought to regain the initiative while Eisenhower reacted. (But, in fairness to Eisenhower, the Allies were completely surprised by the German attack in the Ardennes while Manstein anticipated the attack against him.)

It is also important to recognize the levels of culminating

points. Each level of execution of war, strategic, operational, and tactical, has a corresponding culminating point that can influence the outcome of an engagement or battle (tactical), a major operation or campaign (operational), or of the war (strategic). Appendix B of FM 100-5 explains and cites several examples of each. Rommel acknowledged the culminating point but only at the tactical level. When he had rebuilt enough after a few days, he again attacked. Had he been thinking of the operational culminating point, he might have saved his forces for the defense of the Second Battle of El Alamein. Hitler would not even recognize the tactical culminating point, but by fighting the battle too long Hitler passed his operational culminating point on the western front in the Ardennes and set the stage for a quicker victory by the Allies.

The culminating point, if recognized, serves as the trigger point for the counterattack or counteroffensive. By definition victory should be assured since the attacker no longer has the capability to successfully defend. Today, commanders could select applicable events leading to or forecasting an enemy's culminating point and then direct intelligence collection assets to look for those as priority intelligence requirements. Sensing the culminating point is critical to taking advantage of it. Auchinleck never did sense Rommel's operational culminating point and thus depleted his forces unnecessarily in undecisive tactical engagements. Montgomery was still waiting to make sure the Germans had absolutely passed it, and, consequently, failed to do his part to bag the German Army.

Finally, it is important to note that the predominant

recurring traits or events which caused the culminating points of the three campaigns to be reached should have been evident to the commanders before action was initiated. Force ratios, logistics, and troop exhaustion can reasonably be calculated before battle. The commanders' overconfidence and stubborn commitment to a flawed course of action contributed most directly to their culminating points.

#### CONCLUSION

The review of the three battles did yield some recurring characteristics or traits that may be of use today in forecasting the approach of a culminating point, but, more important, the study found that a conscious awareness of the concept of the culminating point can pay great dividends to an operational commander. At the same time, the study discovered that some commanders chose to ignore the conspicuous events forecasting their culminating points and they suffered defeats as a result. The majority of these events were under the control of the attacker; the attacking commander contributed more to his own defeat than did the defending enemy. Also, the culminating point is relative to the actions taken by the enemy and not independent of them.

FM 100-5 has reintroduced the culminating point to the field force and has started the education process to help sufficient tact to the culminating point with the "discriminative judgment" Clausewitz said was necessary. A better understanding of theory and its relationship to doctrine is important; understanding the concept of the culminating point is one example. WW II commanders provide some good examples of those that did understand it better

than their contemporaries. Those that did were more successful in their campaigns.

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